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Documenting performance art: documentation in practice

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This article addresses questions raised at the intersection of theory and practice in documenting performance art. What formal and technical considerations must be made in performance art documentation? How does a documenter deal with the (inevitably) unexpected/non-ideal? To what extent should documentation document? Working with a group of nascent performance artists at the University of Alberta in Canada, the author aimed to photographically document numerous student performances as well as performances by master performers brought in to teach the students. Operating on his background as a professional commercial photographer and as an art historian, he shares his insights, experiences and personal perspectives on the emergent issues that arise when translating theory into practice and *vice versa*, in the process of documenting performance art through photography.

Keywords: Live art; photography; performance; documentation; subjectivity; documenter

Introduction

In the spring of 2013 I set out on a performance-based research project, wherein I sought to photographically document seven nascent performance artists as they learned the theory and practice of performance art in an experimental course at the University of Alberta. At the time of writing this article, I am in the fourth and final year of my Bachelors of Art, Honors, in the History of Art, Design, and Visual Culture at Alberta; earlier, however, I worked for about five years as a professional commercial photographer. It is at the intersection of photographic praxis and historical art theory around which much of my scholarly work revolves. By inhabiting the practice of documenting performance, I hope to simultaneously address the theoretical and the practical in terms of performance art itself and the act of documenting it.

The perceived reality of photography

Many claims about the photograph's objecthood and connection to reality have been made since photography emerged in the early to mid nineteenth century. Louis Daguerre said of his *daguerreotype*, the first commercially successful photographic process: '[it] is not merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature; on the contrary it is a chemical and physical process which gives her the power to reproduce herself' (quoted in Gernsheim and Gernsheim 1968, 81). Daguerre invokes photography's mechanical nature, tied to the physical world and virtually automatic; it is a process by

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which reality is reproduced, merely facilitated by the photographer but ultimately accomplished by Nature herself. Edward Weston, an early-twentieth-century art photographer, furthers this notion, claiming that: 'only with effort can the camera be forced to lie: basically it is an honest medium' (quoted in Sontag [1977] 2011, 187). That the camera is capable only of conveying truth – so long as the images it produces have not been manipulated in some way outside the camera – permeates the discourse surrounding photography. Susan Sontag takes note of this in the introductory chapter of her germinal *On Photography*: '[p]hotographed images do not *seem* to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire' ([1977] 2011, 3; emphasis added). While Sontag seems to be making a tacit endorsement of photography's truthfulness, she is in fact very careful in her use of language. Instead of merely making claims about photography's ontology, she prefers to make statements about its perceived ontology.

The discourse to which Sontag alludes, but carefully circumvents, is one that establishes the photographic document as being inextricably tied to reality in some objective way. A photograph's indexicality – its innate ability to mechanically record a particular view of space, for a particular duration of time, in a way that is intelligible to the human eye – is the basis for such arguments. French film critic and theorist André Bazin is a pivotal figure is this regard. He likens photography to the ancient Egyptian practice of mummification, claiming that: 'the photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it […] by the power of an impassive mechanical process […] it embalms time' (Bazin 1960, 8). Whereas Sontag claims that photography merely appears to capture reality, Bazin states it as a matter of fact.

American art critic and theorist Rosalind Krauss, on the other hand, defers to the material and physical aspects of the photographic process in order to make particular claims about photography's nature. Invoking the same sentiments as Daguerre and Weston, Krauss emphasizes the direct physical connection between a photograph and its object: 'every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface [and] is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object' (1977, 75). Avoiding the poetic and metaphysical, Krauss nevertheless elucidates the idea that a photograph's ontology is directly tied to a physical object, based in reality. A photograph, an icon with a direct physical connection to a material object, is a representation of reality, captured and preserved instantaneously and indefinitely by mechanical means.

Engaging in this issue, Roland Barthes refers to what he calls the photograph's 'absolutely analogical nature' when he asks, and immediately answers: 'What is the content of the photographic message? What does the photograph transmit? By definition, the scene itself, the literal reality' ([1978] 2010, 16–17). Approaching the matter from his own, personal relationship with them, photographs are nonetheless physical tokens, evidence that something happened somewhere sometime in the past. Barthes (1981, 113) reconciles the tendency of photography to conflate 'that-has-been' with 'there-it-is' by remarking:

> [h]ere is where the madness is, for until this day no representation could assure me of the past of a thing except by its intermediaries; but with the Photograph, my certainty is immediate: no one in the world can undeceive me. (Barthes 1981, 115)

Photographs are thus literal representations of reality, indices of that which has been.

Because of this perceived innate, objective connection to reality, photography is predisposed towards documentation. Performance art, conversely, is a medium that practically begs to be documented. By its very nature, performance is ephemeral. Without a document, a performance ceases to be extant once it is over, save for whatever physical traces, remains, residues or relics it may happen to leave behind. Its record exists solely in the memories of those who happened to be present. Certainly, whether or not performance should even *be* documented is an unsettled academic debate. Cindy Nemser claims that the 'primary goal of performance art [is] the desire to bring the subjective and objective self together as a totally integrated entity' (1971, 42), while Peggy Phelan famously argues that 'to the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology' (1993, 146). These two theorists posit that documentation is antithetical to the very ontology of performance as a medium, and privilege the primacy of witnessing a performance in person. Amelia Jones problematizes this preference toward first-hand accounts of performance from the perspective of someone who studies and writes about performance, pointing out that:

> the problems raised by [her] absence [from a performance] are largely logistical, rather than ethical or hermeneutic. That is, while the experience of viewing a photograph and reading a text is clearly different from that of sitting in a small room watching an artist perform, neither has a privileged relationship to the historical 'truth' of the performance. (Jones 1997, 11)

Further pursuing this argument, Philip Auslander states that: 'perhaps the authenticity of the performance document resides in its relationship to its beholder rather than to an ostensibly originary event: perhaps its authority is phenomenological rather than ontological' (2006, 8). Whereas Phelan and Nemser's critique of performance documentation hinges on the Bazanian ontology of photography, Jones and Auslander suggest that photographic documents of performance represent phenomenological experiences in their own right, and are not tied to an objective originary experience.

At the intersection of theory and practice

With these assorted notions percolating beneath the surface, I began my project of learning to document performance art. As I worked with and alongside seven up-and-coming performance artists, I sought to address two primary concerns: firstly, how can I, as a documenter, best collaborate with and facilitate the performers; and secondly, what can I learn about photography, both as a documentary tool and in regard to performance art? Throughout the course of the project, a third concern naturally emerged: what is a performance document's ontology?

Despite having actually taken hundreds of thousands of photographs in my life, I had never really considered the implications on photographic practice of the photograph's ontological status. Coming out of the milieu of commercial photography, creating documentary photographs as objective representations of reality was the *de facto* goal. A photograph seems to capture reality through its indexical relationship to it, and the camera, as a tool, is indeed effective at maintaining the illusion of verisimilitude: it captures a scene almost instantly; it has optics that work

very similarly to our own eyes; and it is mechanical, which immediately brings to mind notions of accuracy, reproducibility and infallibility. In truth, however, a photographer must apply a great deal of skill and experience when capturing a photograph to ensure that the result is in any way intelligible.

A germinal moment for myself came after the first of four weeks documenting student performance sketches, wherein the students created works of performance pertaining to specific 'genres.' This first week, they were getting their performance feet wet by producing pieces inspired by the 1960s and 1970s Fluxus movement of action-based and instruction-based art, commonly associated with Joseph Beuys, Allan Kaprow and Yoko Ono, among others. These pieces were, generally speaking, very dynamic and highly participant driven. In a word: frenetic. Like any good photographer, I arrived prepared to shoot anything, but in actuality knew nothing about what each Fluxus-derived piece would entail. One performer invited participants to engage with their own reflections in a pair of hand-held makeup mirrors; another performed napping in a busy public elevator; one wove participants into a spider web of multi-colored string; and yet another instructed his group of participants to 'follow the artist,' after which he lead them on a chase around campus with the unspoken goal of attempting to lose his participants (Figure 1).

In my professional work as a photographer, I am often asked to photograph corporate events, galas and ribbon-cutting ceremonies. Typically, clients provide scant details about these events, and I rely on my photographer instincts to capture the important action. What this translates into in reality is that I shoot anything and everything, lest I overlook or miss some crucial detail. So, consequent to this approach, when I worked on the performance art piece, I spent half an hour riding in an elevator, taking pictures as a performer slept on the floor; I photographed in meticulous detail each strange, spider-like contortion another performer made as she bound her participants in spools of bright string; and I followed another even after

Figure 1. Tim Mikula (shirtless) leads a group of participants in a Fluxus-inspired game of Follow the Artist.

all his followers had given up and he wandered the neighborhood shirtless, shoeless and sockless. All told, I shot over 1100 photographs in total during the week of Fluxus-derived performances.

The aforementioned significant moment, however, actually came when I set out to document *Marking Time II*, a six-hour durational work by Marilyn Arsem, our visiting lecturer from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Like the performances of the preceding week, I knew nothing about what spending six hours documenting her would entail, and I inevitably fell back on my instincts, photographing every movement and nuanced detail I was able to over the course of the six hours.

The tone of the performance was funereal and somber, and the space was illuminated by a single, exposed light bulb, dangling from the ceiling of the gallery (Figure 2). Every release of the shutter penetrated the relative silence of the space, and my entire body unavoidably tensed up with anxiety: the sense that I was intruding on some sacred ritual was unshakable. The dull lighting, combined with the long lenses I used, necessitated relatively long exposures. With every shot, I pulled my elbows in tight, took a deep breath, held it and depressed the shutter release, hoping for the best. I performed this action 849 times over the course of the six hours.

One week into my project, I had accumulated nearly 2000 photographs, documenting merely eight performances. I was mentally exhausted, and my field notes for the week consisted entirely of personal reflections regarding the challenges of trying to find pleasing formal compositions while shooting from the hip, or how nerve-wracking it is to intrude upon the personal space of a performer with a camera lens. Not having really given much thought to what it meant to document performance, I had become caught up in trying to create what I thought good documents should be. The word 'document' itself connotes impartiality, an unaffected clinical approach. Crime-scene photographs are documents. They seek to communicate the most information as efficiently as possible, and without inserting authorial bias. The pace of documenting in this manner was not sustainable and neither did I feel I was learning anything new or anything particularly in respect of performance documentation. In

Figure 2. Marilyn Arsem, performing *Marking Time II*.

order to have any substantive realizations I decided that it would be imperative to genuinely challenge myself, above and beyond taking as many photographs of a performance in the shortest amount of time. I decided to forget how to be a commercial photographer and to truly learn how to perform documenting.

To achieve this goal, I established a set of experiments each week designed to systematically limit my personal agency as photographer, thereby creating what I thought would be more impartial (and therefore more useful) documents of the performances. After the first week of frenzied, free-form documenting, I found ways to limit myself in terms of time and space, as well as the ability to recover from failure. As they studied duration and endurance under the tutelage of Marilyn Arsem, and with performances by Marina Abramovic in mind, I limited myself to one image, and one image only, of each performance. When they tackled daily task and ritual, after having studied the works of Tehching Hsieh, I photographed their pieces at pre-determined intervals. Finally, as they created site-responsive group works, grounded in the writings of Paul Couillard, I limited myself to shooting from stationary locations.

The experiment for duration and endurance week was devised directly in response to the overwhelming number of photographs taken the week prior. Not only had it been an exhausting endeavor, but it also made me question just how necessary such prolific documentation was. Is it possible to capture an entire performance in only one photograph? Textbooks and journal publications do not normally have the real estate to devote to a compendium of several hundred photographs for only one perform-ance. The most identifiable performances in the history of the form will often bring to mind a single iconic picture: *Interior Scroll* (1975) will undoubtedly conjure the image of Carolee Schneeman towering above the viewer as she contorts her naked body to unfurl a scroll of paper from her vagina; Yoko Ono, kneeling resignedly, stoic, eyes averted, as an unidentified participant takes scissors to her already-tattered clothing, is probably what you imagine when I mention *Cut Piece* (1964). It may be a byproduct of the way in which art historical discourse is taught and disseminated, or it could possibly be the ironic flipside of our image driven/saturated culture; either way, it seems necessary to distill a performance into the most informative and digestible image possible.

Duration and endurance week produced a grand total of seven photographs. With the exception of one performer who chose to test her endurance by jogging around the campus in a laced-up corset and high heels, everyone produced pieces that were stationary and involved repetitive actions. As I had hoped, this lent itself well to the one-photograph-no-more-no-less rule for the week; documenting the corset piece, however, ended in what I would characterize as failure. Knowing I could only take one photograph, I spent the duration of the piece waiting for the right moment when I could best capture the performer in a way that communicated the difficulty of running around with most of her internal organs pushed into her chest cavity. In the end, I had to suffice with taking one blurry photograph as she ran away from me, right near the end of her performance (Figure 3).

The other pieces were all at least an hour in length, and I had ample time to consider how best to capture each one. I studied each performer's actions at length, considering the potential vantage points and different ways to compose each shot. One performer sat squarely in the middle of the terrazzo floor of the library foyer (Figure 4); one knelt in an arrangement of stones, atop a small hill (Figure 5); and another stood under a running hose, suspended from the branch of a tree (Figure 6).
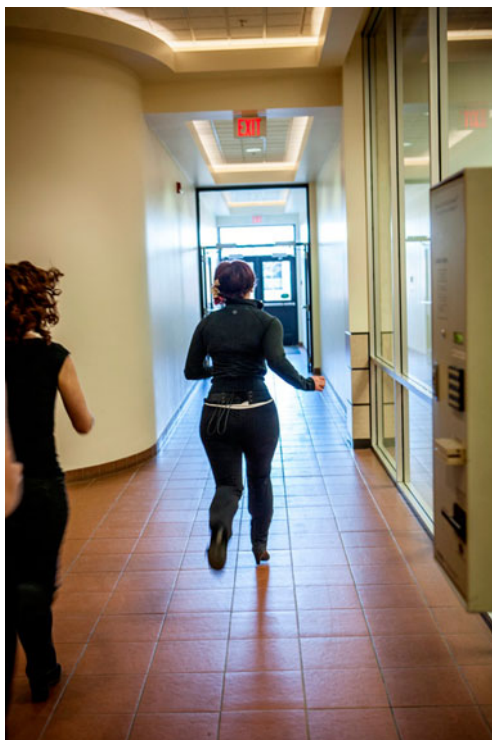
Figure 3. Theresa Holzman enduring a jog while bound in a corset.

Figure 4. Harley Morison.

Ultimately, capturing each document boiled down to balancing the various formal elements of the particular spaces, and capturing just the right moment in each performer's actions in a way that was both informative and aesthetically pleasing.

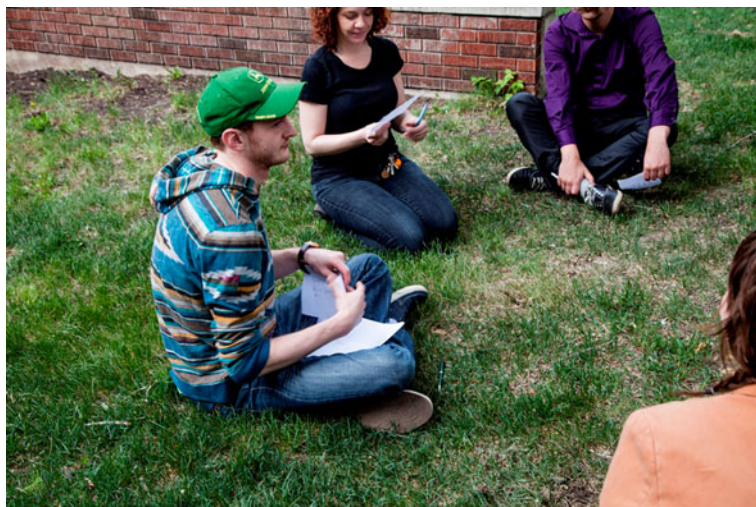Figure 5. Kayla Callfas.

Figure 6. Laura Porter.

Figure 7. Harley Morison (left) engages a group in a performance.

And so, despite the fact that I had solved the 'problem' of over-documenting, I had failed to create documents that were not fully imbricated with my own subjectivity.

For the week of daily task and ritual, I devised the method of shooting at pre-determined intervals in an attempt to eliminate my personal/professional bias in the timing of each photograph. In this method, I would ask each performer to dictate the amount of time that should elapse between each shot. In theory, I hoped that, by removing my ability to determine the 'best' moment to take a shot, an emergent truth about the performances would be revealed. In reality, the process was mostly frustrating, and the documents from the first day ranged in quality from curious but uninformative to wholly indecipherable (Figure 7). Kept in the dark about my true intentions in an attempt to prevent my experiment from contaminating their choices, the performers chose relatively long periods at which to be documented. In the 90 seconds to five minutes between each shot, a lot of action would be missed and the resulting documents lacked coherency. I refused to believe that this was the emergent truth of the performances.

Frustrated by this result, I made the decision to break my own rules for the second day of performances that week, and allowed the performers more leeway in choosing their intervals: one photograph each at the beginning, middle and end of the performance; one photograph after every third egg (Figure 8); one photograph at the beginning of each song; and four photographs only, taken at my discretion throughout the piece. The documents created as a result of this amended rule, while no further toward my goal of impartiality, do illustrate the interesting interplay that can arise between performer and documenter. My rhythm and their rhythm necessarily had to achieve some sort of synchronicity, and in one instance I was charged with determining the length of the piece by virtue of the fact that I had to take one photograph at the very end. While the photographs themselves are not ideal documents of the events, the process of capturing them highlighted the collaborative potential of the artist–documenter relationship.

Figure 8. Theresa Holzman.

Having addressed the variable of time, it was only fitting that I address space the following week. Ultimately, the final experiment arose from an idea I had been considering for a while: do the arbitrary movements of the photographer create a sense of disjointed space in the viewer? And, if so, will shooting from just one location lend itself to a greater feeling of one contiguous environment? Could the documents of a performance be used to spatially reconstruct the environment in which it occurred? So, as the student performers created works that would activate public spaces, I sought to visually map those spaces. I charged myself with shooting from particular locations, not moving further than the distance I could pivot on one foot. On the first day I chose the location arbitrarily based on how I expected the performances to unfold, and on the second I asked the performers to tell me from where they wanted me to document them.

The documents resulting from the first day failed to meet my initial expectations, primarily due to an error in judgment on my part. While I did not move from the spot I had chosen for each performance, the constant changes in focal length between shots effectively eliminated any spatial coherency: zooming in and out to capture the action nullified what I attempted to achieve by remaining stationary. I resolved to put them aside, opting to rectify the attempt after the fact, reciting in my head the mantra of any seasoned photographer: 'we'll fix it in post.'

As with the previous week, the second day of performances provided an interesting opportunity to engage in collaborative documentation with the

performers. While they did not necessarily choose the most optimal (by my estimation) place from which to be documented, their choices nevertheless provided curious insight into what they felt was important to be captured in their performances, and provided unique opportunities for collaborative documentation.

The first group elected to incorporate me directly into their performance. They sought to create an oppressive, totalitarian atmosphere in which participants were made to complete timed tasks. They sat me at the front of the room, a panoptic Orwellian eye, scrutinizing the participants' actions. They instructed me to appear serious and imposing. Whether or not my presence had the intended effect, I cannot say: the participants rebelled, somewhat predictably, against the strict testing conditions, pushing back against the artists' authority. The way in which the performers chose to incorporate me into their performance, however, did pique my interest.

As another pair of performers led their group of participants into the nearby subway station, they elected to have me shoot from a distance and in such a manner that it would not be revealed to the non-participating bystanders that an action was presently taking place. The prospect to shoot covertly was exciting, both in terms of the anxiety it produced in me and the pleasure I found in the challenge. The resulting images are blurry and uncomposed, and yet strangely informative about the performance itself. The clandestine nature of the performative action is mirrored in the haphazard photographs.

The last pair had me shoot their performance from the outside, looking in. Their forms, and those of the participants, are largely obscured by the reflections of trees and the sky in the windows of the pedway in which the action took place; however the performers were curious to see how their performance interacted with the architectural forms of the space, and how it would be experienced by passers-by. While the photographs are not illustrative of the specific actions of the performers and participants, they do give an alternative phenomenological account of its occurrence (Figure 9).

At the end of this final week of performance sketches, I revisited the images produced on the first day of site specific performance. As a set, the images lacked the cogency I had anticipated capturing; returning again to my photographer roots, I decided to create the coherent sense of space that I had hoped would emerge naturally. One of the performances saw performers and participants activating the entire arts quad at the university, as they spread outward from a central point, engaged the entire time in a casual conversation. From the images of this performance, I selected a series from which I could create a sweeping 360-degree panorama, illustrating both the immense space activated and the physical distances between each of the participants by the end. Another performance snaked through a pedway (the same one outside which I would be shooting the following day). By selecting a certain sequence of images and combining them into a short stop-motion animation, the viewer does achieve a sense of the volume and configuration of the long, narrow interior space.

Reinvigorated by the successes of these experimental composites, I returned to the images of Marilyn Arsem I had shot three weeks prior. The idea of mapping spaces was fresh in my mind as I tried to make sense of the large number of photographs. Accustomed as I am to sorting through large photosets, I found myself flipping through the images in rapid succession. Like the stop-motion animation I created for the previous week's performance, viewing the Arsem images like this
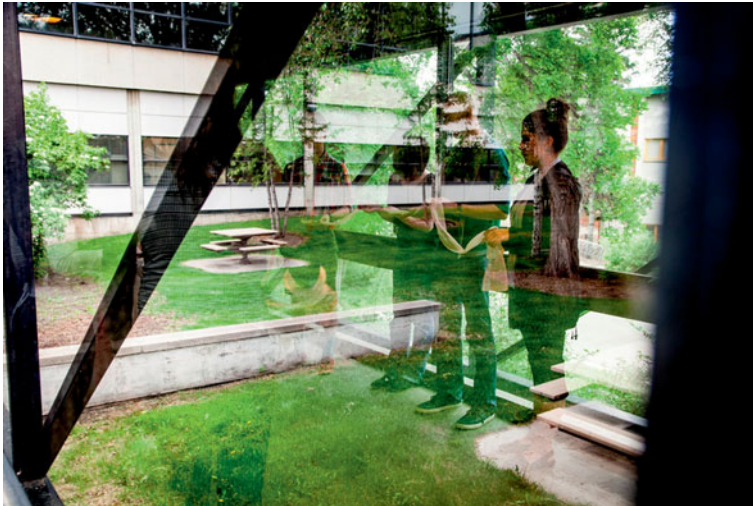
Figure 9. Laura Porter (foreground) and Kayla Callfas (right) lead a group through a pedway in a collaborative performance.

created a distinct impression of the interior configuration of the gallery space, despite the fact that I had not limited my movements to one spot. In fact, I found myself reliving the performance, and understanding it in new ways as I observed my own movements in relation to the performer. Photographs map not only space, however, but time as well: they present a certain sequence of events in order, but also (through the digital metadata associated with each image) the exact time at which each shot was taken. Painstakingly, I assembled the 849 images into a six-minute animation of the six-hour performance, such that each image is on screen for a number of video frames proportionate to the amount of time that elapsed between it and the following shot. The result is a representation that documents and reveals the collaborative performance between Arsem and myself.[1]

A distinct tension exists between performer and documenter. Each is acutely aware of the other, and as a documenter my initial reaction is to minimize my impact on the performance. Wildlife photographers shoot from afar and conceal themselves in blinds so as to capture their quarry in its natural habitat. For better or worse, performance documenters do not typically have such luxury, and must consequently co-inhabit a space with a performer. The first several hundred images of Arsem's performance illustrate the tension and tentative negotiation of roles between performer and documenter. Eventually, she and I fall into a rhythm, and while the tension remains throughout, it transmutes from being nervous to being anticipatory.

Between the performer and the documenter
The course was set to culminate in a final night of performance at the local contemporary art gallery. As we all began to prepare for our final performances, the student performers set out to integrate everything they acquired over the past five weeks into a piece that embodied their own bourgeoning performance styles and

sensibilities. Likewise, I was faced with synthesizing my own observations and research into some kind of theory of performance art documentation. Marilyn Arsem wrote to thank me for documenting her performance. Something she said in that email struck a chord with what I had been struggling with during my project, but had not fully been able to articulate: 'it is wonderful to see […] and understand what the viewers saw […]. While I know it from the inside, I often don't fully understand a work until I see images' (Marilyn Arsem, email to Michael Woolley, 25 May 2013). Even with her first-hand experience of her own performance, Arsem sees the value in photographic documentation, not merely as records of an event that transpired but as alternate entry points into the same performance.

While photographs are innately indexical, they are not fixed to an objective phenomenological experience of reality. Nevertheless, I had spent a month trying to manufacture objectivity, under the misguided assumption that this would produce the most ideal documents. The experiments had centered about abrogating my own agency as photographer in an attempt to produce more 'impartial' imagery. I felt that, in order to be the most effective documents, my photographs needed to maintain a clinical distance from that which they documented, free of my personal biases and years of conditioning in the world of commercial photography. The more impartial the images became, however, the less useful information they carried about the performances. The documents that worked the best were not those that dispassionately attempted to convey just the facts of the situation; rather, those that worked with the performers and their performances, instead of in spite of them, contributed something unique and unexpected in their documentation. Rather than suppress my own subjectivity and years of photographic training, it became clear that I needed to embrace it, and incorporate everything I had learned into my own shooting style.

Just as I had, over the course of six hours, become somewhat attuned to Arsem's performance rhythm, I had spent the previous five weeks learning, understanding and inhabiting the particularities, peculiarities and proclivities of each of the student performers' performance styles. Consulting with each of them I learned about their performances, and what they desired from the documentation. Through a collaborative approach, I would seek to create documents that benefited from my photographer's eye, highlighting unique and interesting aspects of each piece in ways otherwise impossible without the camera. Simply showing what had happened did not seem sufficient; I wanted viewers to be able to rebuild, if not the entire evening, then at least portions of it in their own mind's eye, according to how I saw things.

One performer planned to lead groups of participants through a guided sensory exploration, and opted to forgo photographic documentation; we both agreed it would have a deleterious effect on the experience of her piece. Three others simply asked that I document their works as I happened across them in the gallery space: one would contemplate the passage of time and the nature of privative spaces as she worked to sweep a dusty alcove above the gallery's washrooms, entirely hidden, save for when she passed by a small opening in the wall (Figure 10); another sat in front of three large chocolate sheet cakes, which he would eat continuously so long as no one was sitting across from him, seeking to address ideas relating to the abject, and the public's perception of grotesque consumption (Figure 11); and the last parodied the art critic, writing inane observations about the evening on a notepad, crumpling them up and littering them about the gallery space. They provided no other special

Figure 10. Mooie Liao.

instructions as to what I should shoot, but felt they could trust my photographer's instincts to capture the important moments and perspectives: the shadow of the first, as she moved almost silently about her alcove; the retching of the second, as he began to dry heave for the first time; and the impassive scrutiny of the third,

Figure 11. Harley Morison.

surrounded by other performers, works of contemporary sculpture and her own observational detritus.

The remaining three planned pieces that would leave behind large-scale remnants. With each of them, I coordinated to both document their performances as well as map the relics each would produce. By creating composite images, I would be able to record both the fine details of these pieces as well as their large scales in a way otherwise inaccessible. The first of them spent three hours filling an entire wall with every brand name he could recall, in a test of mental endurance and as a demonstration of the pervasiveness of contemporary brand culture. The second engaged gallery goers in conversation, asking to share experiences from their own lives, which she then recorded on masking tape she placed around their feet, mapping her encounters over the evening. And the last mourned the passing of a loved one by cutting the sheet music of a sentimental song into small pieces, gluing them to the gallery floor with her own saliva into a 'stream' that snaked through the gallery space (Figures 12 and 13).

With each of them, I tracked their progress through the evening, making records not only of their processes, but also of the unexpected and emergent aspects of their works as the night unfolded. The first developed a particular way of holding his chalk, and rolling it between his fingers as he struggled to come up with just one more brand name (Figure 14). I told the second about my dog, and took pictures of my own feet as she wrote my words onto the tape rectangle she placed around them.

Figure 12. Laura Porter.

Figure 13. Composite image of the artifacts from a performance by Laura Porter.

The third would later tell me how thankful she was for my presence over the course of the night; those watching treated her performance with a sense of reverence, but kept their distance, not wanting to intrude on what was an immensely personal experience. The friendship I had developed with her over the previous six weeks allowed me to be an interloper in her piece, and provide her with unexpected companionship as she worked tirelessly at her task.

While the documentation of her performance may lack the ability to illustrate it, my presence there in those moments was a comfort to her. When I began this project,
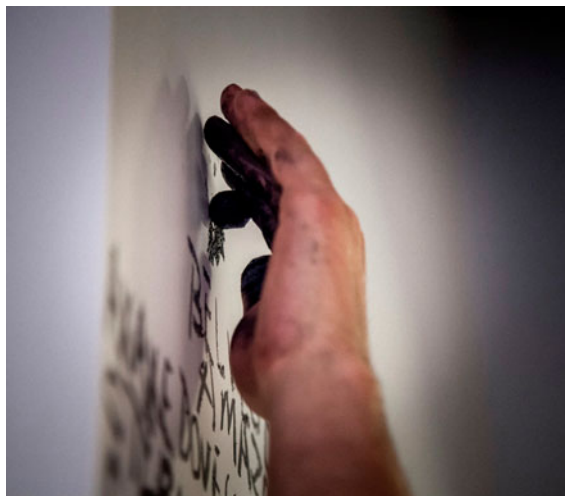
Figure 14. Tim Mikula's hand.

I would have found that lack to be problematic and disconcerting. Now, at the end of it, I understand more readily that a photographic document needs only to convey how I saw things at the time. Her experience of comfort was outside my own, inaccessible to me, and therefore not conveyed in the imagery. It happened, irrespective of the fact that the photographs failed to capture it, but that it remains intangible is not a matter that concerns me anymore. The photographs from that evening are slices of my own lived experience, and will, as such, inevitably differ from the experience of others who were present.

Questioning photography as a documentary tool

For Bazin, photography is an embalming of the dead – every photograph is an entombment of time, an objective but ultimately passive and non-live document; Krauss sees the medium as a mechanical, clinical index of moments in time, free from the intervention of human consciousness at the moment of its creation; and Barthes sees in photographs perfect analogons of reality. The arguments of these theorists hinge on the idea that a photograph has an ontology directly related to an objective experience of reality. A photograph, by this proposition, presents the view of what a fraction of time from a particular perspective looked like at that specific moment. And, while the photograph is indisputably indexical, and it represents a view of reality from a moment in time, it cannot be said to be a definitive record of reality.

Sontag expands on this point, explaining that 'it is not reality that photographs make immediately accessible, but images' ([1977] 2011, 165). However, her ambivalence regarding a photograph's ontology leaves something to be desired. To understand what a photograph is merely by engaging with it on a theoretical level is to understand – only through the most bare, mechanical understanding – what a photograph looks like, or what it appears to represent, or how it came to be. To create photographs is to necessarily experience both failure and success, and to understand the multitude of simultaneous realities that are possible to represent through the medium. No one phenomenological experience of reality is *ipso facto* the most representative experience of reality, but a photograph must depict a phenomenological account nevertheless. A photographic document is not useful because it tells us a thing happened at a place one time, but because a photographer's subjective experience of that thing/place/time is imbricated within the photographic record itself; a viewer of such a document gains an understanding of what that particular experience was, even if it differs from what they would have personally experienced had they been there in person.

Through his reading of André Rouillé's 2005 *La Photographie*, Andy Stafford problematizes the Bazinian ontology of photography. He, too, rejects the photograph as reliquary (Stafford 2013, 50), and takes issue with the 'Bazinian vocabulary of death, relic, ruin, imprint, deposit that has been used in works on photography by Barthes [and] Rosalind Krauss […] in the years since Bazin's 1945 essay' (2013, 58). Rouillé, likewise, calls for an affirmation of the photograph's 'vitality' (quoted in Stafford 2013, 58) and further calls for a dismissal of the notion of any singular ontology for the photographic image. Like Bazin, Barthes and Krauss, these theorists arrive at their arguments solely by means of theory and logical deduction. I may share their conclusions, but we arrive at them by different means. The mode of

research through performance in which I engaged in the project outlined in this article enabled me to inhabit the problems of performance art documentation by performing the act of documentation. It allows me to personally and directly address the problems surrounding the notion of the photograph as document. By establishing a methodology to investigate not only the nature of photography as a documentary tool, but also my own relationship to and perceptions of the medium, I operate at the intersection of theory and praxis. As an interdisciplinary researcher, I am thereby equipped with the instruments to explore the problem from a different direction, and inhabit it through the act of doing it.

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Note

1. Viewable online at https://vimeo.com/74662674 (accessed January 15, 2014).

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